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ABSTRACT

Although corporate spending on partnerships with education has more than doubled in the past 20 years, many in educational circles are questioning whether corporate contributions benefit student knowledge and learning development as well as corporations' bottom lines. Three examples of corporate giving that can be viewed from dual perspectives are information technology training programs, product distribution bonuses, and company-developed curricula. By linking school to work, business/industry partnerships have played a key role in keeping vocational education current with the skill demands of a changing workplace in order to attract students and prepare them for meaningful and relevant employment. Corporate support of education becomes most attractive to both schools and corporations when the goals of both partners are considered. Business/industry partnerships with education must be consensus driven. Because negotiating partnerships can be difficult, a neutral third party may be helpful in facilitating communication between education and corporate communities. Business/industry partnerships cannot be exclusive of worker representation. Educators must understand that dollars contributed to educational institutions must reap rewards for the contributing business; however, business/industry must cease to view their financial contributions from a profit motive perspective and instead consider contributions to be investments in the future work force. (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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MYTHS AND REALITIES 1999
NO. 5

Corporate/School Partnerships: Learner Centered or Business Centered?

As business/industry partnerships with education become increasingly important, questions arise about the influence of business/industry agendas on vocational curriculum. This publication looks at various types of partnership arrangements that business/industry and education have established and how well the needs of both learners and businesses are being addressed through these partnerships. It explores the qualities that distinguish true partnerships from other types of business/school relationships and ways these partnerships can be enhanced.

Do Corporate Financial Contributions Reflect Commitment to Education?

According to the Council for Aid to Education, corporate spending on education in 1996 reached almost $3.5 billion, more than double the amount spent 20 years ago (Lozada 1999). However, the question arising in educational circles is whether those contributions benefit student knowledge and learning development as well as the corporation's or institution's bottom line. Some critics believe that many businesses/educational institutions engage in partnerships for the sole purpose of financial reward, which can result in commercialism taking precedence over learning. Three examples of corporate giving that can be viewed from dual perspectives are (1) IT training programs supported by such companies as Microsoft, Novell, and Cisco; (2) product distribution bonuses offered by such companies as Coke, Pepsi, and Nike; and (3) company-developed curriculum offered by various manufacturers, e.g., Nabisco.

IT training offered to educators and institutions by companies is a significant contribution to the enhancement of technical capacity. But does the training meet the institution's educational goals and students' workplace needs? Although industry training and up-to-date equipment may enable classroom teachers and students to become familiar with new technology, some critics claim that this training is too company specific and that it is designed to create technology robots rather than creative thinkers who know how to use technology. They contend that such company-sponsored programs are designed to ensure a work force that is familiar solely with the specific technology of the contributing company (ibid.). As educational institutions forge partnerships with business/industry, they must keep in mind the educational goals they espouse.

Product distribution bonuses offered to institutions for exclusive distribution of a given product, such as Coke, may bring a great deal of money to an educational institution, but can such contracts be considered "educational" partnerships? Effective educational partnerships must reflect a balance of the needs of all partners affected by the agreement–businesses, parents, students, educators, and community leaders. They must bring added value to both education and industry. Although business/education contracts that enable businesses to advertise products by displaying their logos, advertisements, or equipment on school sportswear, transportation, or property may benefit the institution's financial picture, they have little direct benefit to student learning. "There is no educational value in selling one bottling company exclusive vending machine rights to a school" (Lozada 1999, p. 19).

Company-provided curriculum is another area in which the goals of both parties must be considered before forging a partnership arrangement through which these materials are acquired. Curriculum must contribute to the educational development of learners to be of value to the institution. Quality, objectivity, and capacity to inspire learning must be primary educational considerations. "In a study of corporate-sponsored materials, researchers found that 80 percent 'contained biased or incomplete information and promoted a viewpoint that favored consumption of the sponsor's product or service'" (ibid., p. 20).

Does Corporate Support Help Prepare Students to Meet Workplace Demands?

Vocational education must keep current with the skill demands of a changing workplace if it is to attract students to its programs and prepare them for meaningful and relevant employment. Business/education partnerships have played a key role in this effort by linking school to work. As a result, there has been an upturn in vocational enrollments since the 1980s. In Oklahoma, for example, secondary career and technical program enrollment have "jumped by nearly 50 percent in the last 10 years" (Husain 1999, p. 14). With the rapid growth of technical jobs and new management processes, business and industry have become prime partners in helping vocational educators prepare workers to have the competencies demanded by employers in a high-performance workplace. However, within the partnering arrangement is business's need to reap financial rewards for their investment.

Establishing school enterprises is one strategy for connecting school and work. Singh (1998) reports on the case studies of school enterprise operations in 11 countries: China, India, Indonesia, Papua, New Guinea, Germany, Botswana, Kenya, Ghana, Algeria, Cuba, and Costa Rica. These enterprise activities included on-the-job, apprenticeship, and dual vocational training, and they highlighted three major sets of objectives: economic, educational, and social.

The prime *economic* consideration justifying school enterprises was the need for learners to develop the necessary competencies for self- and wage employment. The *educational* objective guiding the school enterprises was the development of technical and commercial/business curricula that would enhance not only the learner's capacity to create a work enterprise, but also "the development of general personality traits or non-cognitive dispositions and orientations through involvement in real work processes and market production" (Singh 1998, p. 8). The *social* objectives guiding school enterprises in the study were the social and pedagogical concerns that promote a sense of citizenship and a general acceptance of the responsibilities and obligations of citizenship and social stability. Each of these objectives required partners to combine their various business and educational traditions and orientations to arrive at a balance between educational outcomes and economic output.

Corporate support of education becomes most attractive to both partners when the goals of both industry and education are considered. Corporate donors want their contributions reflected in a well-educated and trained pool of workers upon whom they can draw to ensure business success. They want education to "impart a practical skill base adequate to meet the technological requirements of the 'new work force'" (Roy 1994, p. 4). Vocational education must provide this skill base by offering training that helps students develop industry-verified competencies, as well as the nontechnical transferable skills that relate to higher order thinking and high performance, e.g., problem solving, teamwork, workplace adaptability—skills required for work in the 21st century.

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Is Negotiation the Key to Effective Partnering?

Business/industry partnerships with education must be consensus driven. That is, they must reflect the needs of all stakeholders. The Craftsmanship 2000 partnership of business and educational institutions in Oklahoma is one example of a partnership designed to serve the goals of both business and education. The goal of the partnership is to prepare students to be tool and die makers–a skill in great demand nationally (Lozada 1999). The business partners sponsor paid work-based learning experiences for students that pay wages of $6.50 to $9 per hour and bonuses that are based on grades, attendance, and technical skills. "Inherent in that is state-of-the art training and real experience in a work setting. Schools also get industry input regarding their course work–what to get rid of and what to add" (ibid., p. 19). Through their negotiated partnership, businesses invest in their financial futures by "training the high-skill employees they so badly need" (ibid.). "Corporate involvement must support the goals and objectives of the schools. Curriculum and instruction are within the purview of educators" (ibid., p. 20).

Negotiating partnerships can be difficult. Sometimes a neutral third party is helpful in facilitating the communication between education and corporate communities. In Oklahoma, a nonprofit organization called Career Partners administers the school partnership arrangements, including partner recruiting, job skills, internships, job shadowing, payroll, liability insurance, and other work-related issues. As the third party, Career Partners acts as the broker, ensuring that the needs of all partners are being met through negotiation (Lozada 1999).

Partnering can also be used to eliminate conflicts between organizations. In central Missouri, GTE Data Services and the state government were competing for the same pool of IT employees. Negotiation and collaboration offered an alternative to the organizations' aggressive raiding of workers. "The state government, GTE, and 17 other employers joined with the Local Chamber of Commerce and nine institutions of higher education to focus on encouraging the local population to consider IT career options. Coalition initiatives include education fairs, aptitude testing, speakers' bureau services, and fast-track IT training. Coalition members also assist in developing higher education IT curricula that meet employer needs" (Raths 1999, p. 112).

Business/industry partnerships with education cannot be exclusive of worker representation. Unionized partners can be especially useful in negotiating partnerships that address employees' concerns. "Schools that do not involve organized labor and front-line workers are missing a tremendous opportunity to provide comprehensive and effective services to their students" (Potosky 1999, p. 6). Partnerships with local union chapters can facilitate agreements that include community-based work perspectives, identification of growing occupations and job-relevant occupational skills, linkage of learners with appropriate jobs, establishment of skill standards and credential techniques, and assessment and mentoring services.

Value Is an Incentive that Promotes Business/Industry Partnerships with Education

With increased competitiveness in the business sector, tighter budgets, and increased demands for worker productivity, dollars contributed to educational institutions must reap rewards to the contributing business, ensuring added value for each invested dollar. This means that education and business will need to reconsider their missions based on the dramatic changes occurring in the workplace (Roy 1994). Education must recognize the need to—

- better prepare all people to participate as productive, responsible citizens and community members, which can occur only by eliminating barriers that prevent diverse groups from gaining access to such opportunities;
- educate future leaders as to how systems must change to be more inclusive, enabling all individuals to fulfill their career potential; and
- initiate programs that will help to integrate the skills and information needed to pursue "authentic" learning, learning that is relevant to real life and that has meaning to the learner.

To support education's efforts, business/industry must cease to view their financial contributions from a profit motive perspective, but rather consider them investments in the education of the future work force–investments that require their active and continued involvement with the educational community (Roy 1994). The rethinking of practices cannot be the sole assignment of education if the partnership is to be effective in enhancing student learning.

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